

Naomi Hanson
Abstract for an Award
Whalen Symposium 2019

Dauntless She Stood:
Redefining Piracy through the success of Female Pirates

Introducing Female Pirates

Bluntly put, the most successful pirate in history was a woman. Cheng Shih, scourge of the South China sea, controlled over 70,000 men, 10,000 ships, and dominated trade until she decided to retire on her own terms. Yet her life remains obscured in history, along with the lives of numerous other female pirates, specifically Granuaile O'Malley, Anne Bonney, and Mary Read. Absent from popular scholarship, female pirates disrupt what seems to be universally understood: pirates are male. The purpose of this research is to deconstruct our current notions of piracy, and redefine it with the inclusion of women, in order to better understand the true nature of piracy. Rather than previous research that ignored gender complexity, this research proposes new a definition of piracy, one that includes gender.

Challenging Male Dominated Scholarship

Through an extensive look at the secondary source work there is a common thread in the treatment of women pirates. The secondary source work establishes three myths: female pirates were extremely few in number if not rare, they did not achieve the success of their contemporaries, and in the broad view of piracy, women were not important. Even the mere presence of the aforementioned female pirates disprove the claims made by historiography. Granuaile O'Malley, Anne Bonney, Mary Read and Cheng Shih are only a small representation of many female pirates and an even smaller sample of a large population of women who participated in maritime crime. Female pirates inspire an interpretation of piracy that highlights the gender flexibility of the sea and offers a new definition of what it mean to be a pirate.

New Definition of Piracy

The definition of pirates must encompass their ideological nature and go beyond merely gender. Ultimately, the overwhelming economic and political success of female pirates wholly conflicts with the established notions of piracy, and as such the dominant constructions of gender and piracy are contested and assured anew. I chose these four women because they represent different piratical contexts, but they also demonstrate universal flexibility. Regardless of region or century, piracy had the same innate foundational elements: solidarity, freedom, and anti-authoritarianism.

The true nature of piracy revealed by female pirates

Firstly, pirates' commitment to camaraderie created a shockingly universal culture and ethics code that had similar threads throughout multiple centuries. Loyalty was ingrained in the philosophy of piracy and therefore informed social behavior. Solidarity was then reinforced by ritualistic behavior, such as drinking, gambling, dressing, etc. O'Malley, Bonney, Read, and Shih acted out pirate ideology through social ritual and thusly became initiated into the community. While solidarity influenced social behavior,

desire for freedom drew pirates, male and female alike, to life on the sea and created a common ideological thread that transcended gender and class limitations. These women escaped both the confines of legality and femininity. Their intent was one of personal gain, however their impact was one of universal anti-authoritarianism, since pirates' sovereignty is only guaranteed in crime. Female pirates' refusal of established gender limitations threatened their respective authorities more than their violent acts of murder. Society always fashioned these women gender first in an attempt to control their image through newspapers, diaries, royal court documents, etc. Through piracy, these women performed 'bad' womanhood and happily exhibited their disdain for authority with the voice that piracy gave them.

Conclusion

Through theft, song, dance, and murder, female pirates were loud and visible, as they should stay in current historical perspective. They offer new evidence on the true nature of piracy, which casts previous scholarship as exclusive and shallow. Female pirates play an important role in our understanding of the flexibility in history. This essay is part of the pantheon of scholarship that is redefining, reinterpreting, and reclaiming history that excluded women. This research, done over the course of two summers and one independent study, puts female pirates into comparison with each other. It aims to put women at the forefront of discourse on piracy and to restore accuracy to their legacy.